

When **Katie Brindle** is eighteen-and-a-half, I visit her in the one-bedroom apartment in an older building where she is living with her new husband, Dave (a heavy-set white man about her age) and her sixteen-month-old daughter, Nirani. Katie is earning \$9.00 per hour working for a major hotel chain as a maid; Dave is in construction. They've been married about six months. Dressed in gray sweatpants and sweatshirt, with her long, straight blond hair pulled up into a "palm tree" pony tail on the top of her head, Katie looks comfortable. But her black eye makeup, bright pink lipstick, and very long, elaborately painted blue-and-black fingernails with stars reveal her keen interest in fashion and give her a stylish look. She has a number of prominent tattoos, including one on her arm that says "Nirani," and one on her leg with her former boyfriend's name that has been covered up with a new tattoo. Katie is elated; she feels that she is doing "great."

A year and a half later, she and I meet again, this time at her older sister Jenna's house. Katie and Dave have separated, and Nirani, now three, is living with Jenna and her family. Katie is living alternately with her mother and with various friends. She is cleaning houses (with her mother), but she hopes to get a better job, as well as her GED, in the future. A friend's mother "was talking about medical transcripts." Though she is unclear about what the earnings would be, she thinks it would allow her to "be able to work at a desk and I'd still be paid good." At the moment, Katie seems equal parts hopeful and worn out.

The move that Katie, her mother, and her toddler brother, Melmel, made to Florida when Katie was nine was short-lived. Less than a year later, the family returned to Lower Richmond, and Katie went to middle school there. She did well academically, but she began experimenting with drugs, became sexually active, and started fighting with other students. Still, at the end of eighth grade, she was offered admittance to a highly desirable, publicly funded school: a high school with one of the strongest reputations in the city (about a 20-minute bus ride from home). She

was also admitted to a vocational high school and a nearby comprehensive high school. Because she did not want her daughter to travel across town, Ms. Brindle restricted the choice to the two schools closer to home. Katie chose the school with the vocational emphasis. Not long after enrolling, she found some of the school rules, particularly the dress code, oppressive. Also, “it smells, it really reeks over there.” Katie reported, “I’d start fights with people, I’d rip stuff from the walls,” she recalls. “I didn’t want to be there, so they kicked me out.” Next she was assigned to nearby Lower Richmond High School with a reputation for mediocrity. Katie did not like it: “First day of ninth grade, I already started cutting” and was “hanging out with my friends,” “drinking, smoking weed, early in the morning, . . . taking Xanax.” She also was frequently in fights: “I was real crazy. I was always trying to hurt somebody all the time,” she tells me. She failed all of her ninth grade courses. In tenth grade, the scenario was similar, with the addition of a period of cocaine use for about three months in the summer. That was also the summer Katie got pregnant. She was sixteen-and-a-half years old. Having the baby “calmed me down,” she says, noting that she deliberately reduced her drug use and cut back on some of her “partying.” She made two additional efforts to return to high school but ultimately dropped out.

Katie is not sure which of two men is Nirani’s father. One candidate is an African American boyfriend she was in love with, but who, she discovered, had been “cheating on her.” The other possibility is “Lucas,” an African American young man she started “cheating” with in retaliation, after she found out about her first boyfriend’s behavior. Although initially, “it’s all I thought about,” she has not pursued paternity testing: “I think that she’s Lucas’s but then sometimes I think she’s Brian’s. I get confused. So I don’t even like to think about it.” A few months after her daughter was born, Katie started dating Dave, who had “had a crush” on her since high school, and they married soon after. The optimism Katie had expressed when we met during the summer after the wedding faded. The couple began quarreling, which escalated:

“We were getting to the point where it was getting real physical, you know, we’re pulling knives on each other trying to kill each other and all that.” They separated, and Katie and Nirani began living with her mother again. Meanwhile, Dave, who had been convicted of car theft and had spent time in jail before he and Katie were married, was sent back to jail for violating probation. (According to Katie, he had “weed in his car” and “the judge was sick of seeing him.”) When he was released, he and Katie reconciled, split up, reconciled again, and split up again. They have remained separated for several months now. “When I get enough money,” Katie says firmly, “I’m going to divorce him.”

Katie’s relationship with her mother is more openly troubled now than when she was in grade school. Ms. Brindle’s drinking has escalated, as has her tendency to be verbally abusive when drunk. Katie considers her mother’s occupation as a housecleaner demeaning, but she is “proud of” her mother for getting off welfare. Recalling the past, she says, “Back then it was embarrassing [to be on welfare] and it feels good when you ain’t got—when you’re working. It feels good to work.” When Katie is particularly worried about or frustrated by her mother, she turns to Jenna for help.¹ The girls’ younger sibling, Melvin, now thirteen and given to stealing money, is also a source of concern for Katie (and for Jenna, who fears their stepbrother is “headed for jail”).

The challenges of motherhood have been difficult for Katie. “I’m not a good mother. I love [Nirani], but I’m not good with kids. . . . I don’t want any more.” Katie, Jenna, and Ms. Brindle each separately reported that after the baby was born, Katie returned to “partying” and “running the streets.” Ms. Brindle and Jenna were both concerned. At one point during a telephone conversation when Nirani was a baby, Jenna threatened to turn her sister in to the child abuse authorities because of how poorly she cared for her child; Katie hung up on her. From Katie’s perspective, Jenna is a very good mother who “has more patience than me. . . . She prays to God and all

that.” She describes herself as “high-strung” and says, “I don’t have a lot of patience. . . . Things irk me so bad—like to the point where it’ll make me want to hurt her. . . . Like, I get very angry.” Recently, her daughter “went and ripped my mom’s screen door apart.” When Ms. Brindle told Katie she would have to pay to have the door fixed, her anger at Nirani spun dangerously out of control. “I felt like choking her,” Katie tells me. “Like I just started choking her, and I called up my sister and said, ‘I can’t deal with this. You want to . . . take care of her for a little bit while I go take some parenting classes, do this, that, and get out of my mother’s house.’{hrs}”

It is unclear how long “a little bit” might last: “I don’t want it to be permanent, but I don’t want it to be short term.” In particular, Katie wants to have both a job (ideally, one that does not bring her into contact with her mother) and her own apartment before she again takes full-time responsibility for Nirani. At this point, she is working full-time, cleaning houses with her mother. She earns \$9.25 per hour, under the table. Since she is “not good with money,” saving the funds she would need for an apartment will take some time. She is excited about a first-time trip to Las Vegas she is planning with a girlfriend. Katie says she feels “horrible” about leaving her daughter with Jenna, “but I know that growing up with me right now is going to be a lot worse than how she could feel.” Also, “I’m over here a lot . . . it isn’t like I dropped her off.” Her goals are to earn a GED, get a good job,, and have her own apartment: “I want everything to be right before I take her.”